



# CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

Many educators around the country are deeply committed to serving their Black and Latino male students and helping provide the support they need to pursue postsecondary education. But relatively few resources offer practical guidance about how to approach this work.

*Culturally Relevant Education: A Guide for Educators* is one of several guides produced by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools as part of our [evaluation of the City's Expanded Success Initiative \(ESI\)](#). ESI created opportunities for participating high schools to try new strategies (or expand existing programs) aimed at increasing college and career readiness for Black and Latino male students.

The guides cover approaches that principals and teachers across ESI high schools have identified as important to helping young men of color

reach—and be well prepared for—college. (Other topics include Early Exposure to and Preparation for College, Improving Academic Readiness for College, and Creating Supportive Bonds of Brotherhood).

Drawing on interviews and observations in five ESI high schools, each guide begins by briefly describing one of these approaches to boosting college readiness and why schools are using it. The guides then explain *how* individual schools have implemented that strategy, including concrete examples, tips, and tools. Each guide also provides a list of discussion questions and resources for educators.

Together, these materials are designed to inform educators in NYC and beyond as they work to develop innovative programs and services for Black and Latino male high school students.

## What is CRE?

Culturally relevant education (CRE) is a familiar term to many educators. But fewer know how to apply CRE in their day-to-day practice. Broadly speaking, CRE is a way of teaching that empowers students and incorporates their cultures, backgrounds, and experiences into the school environment and classroom activities. More specifically, we define CRE as involving three different elements: 1) **supporting academic success** by setting high expectations for students and providing ample opportunities for them to succeed; 2) **embracing cultural competence**, including a curriculum that builds on students' prior knowledge and cultural experience; and 3) **promoting critical consciousness** by providing students with the tools to critique and challenge institutions that perpetuate inequality.<sup>i</sup>

## Why CRE?

Many students experience a disconnect between their cultural backgrounds and what happens in schools.<sup>ii</sup> This disconnect may help explain why some students are less likely to engage and excel in school. In contrast, by focusing on students' cultures and on issues that are relevant to their lives, schools may increase student confidence, interest, and engagement. CRE can also help schools address underlying biases educators may have toward their students—particularly Black and Latino males. Unearthing and challenging these biases may improve relationships within the school and help set students up for success.<sup>iii</sup>

For all these reasons, the schools highlighted in this guide have made culturally relevant education a cornerstone of their professional development and an underlying principle of their curriculum and instruction. These schools are bringing CRE to life. In the following pages, we draw on their experiences to provide tips for other schools wrestling with how to implement a school-wide approach to CRE.

This guide was authored by Tony Laing and Adriana Villavicencio.

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# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## ACORN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

ACORN's professional development (PD) in CRE is both regular and robust. The school relies on in-house expertise and outside resources to build capacity in CRE among its teaching staff. While ACORN staff report that this effort is still a work in progress, they have gleaned a number of valuable insights about CRE from their experience to date:

### Give teachers practical strategies.

ACORN's principal emphasized that CRE trainings provide teachers with real tools to use in their classrooms and daily interactions with students: "When we do PD, it's not only just about theory. It's about the actual practice, and how you embed these different strategies into your practice." One teacher described what she retained from CRE trainings: "What I've learned is how to affirm—or how not to negate—my male students' identities. What I got out of it most is understanding how I can improve my communication, how I can improve my teaching and interactions with the students."

### Provide regular and ongoing support.

New teachers receive training specific to CRE, and all teachers are observed for elements of CRE in their classrooms. Many of the school's monthly PD sessions utilize vendors delivering CRE training (see p. 11). Teachers reported that when these workshops take place outside of the school building, designated staff disseminate the valuable information they received to the rest of the teachers. The staff also hold regular "lunch and learn" sessions, in which they read and discuss a book or article to further grapple with how to better serve students of color.

"When you take that extra push like [this teacher] did, you're more than a teacher. You're a motivator. You're a role model.

**You could be everything to that kid, and you don't even know it."**

– ACORN Student



# INCORPORATING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND INTERESTS

## ACORN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

Educators at ACORN report that the CRE workshops and ongoing conversations with colleagues have led to changes in pedagogy and instruction at the school. Staff are intentional about incorporating students' cultures into the school environment and classroom instruction, across subject areas. This includes referencing students' ethnic identities, as well as youth culture more broadly, in ways that are affirming and directly relevant to students' lives.

### **Adopt elements of student-led classrooms.**

ACORN teachers have had PD workshops on how to structure and implement "roundtables," in which individual students present to a small group of peers and teachers about an area in which they have some expertise. One teacher summarized: "How do we put our students in a position where they can be successful, but they do feel challenged, and they do feel accomplished, after they've completed it?" The experience not only aims to promote students' growth mindset—or the belief that they can become more academically skilled through practice and work—but also provides an opportunity to learn presentation skills students will need in academic and professional environments.

### **Use art and pop culture to elicit student perspectives on race.**

ACORN utilizes Question Bridges, a documentary-style video art installation featuring Black men of all ages and backgrounds asking and responding to questions about life in America. The teacher who runs the afterschool program has also used clips from the television show *The Boondocks* (an animated sitcom created by Aaron McGruder that airs on Cartoon Network's late-night programming block, Adult Swim) to challenge students to critically analyze examples of Black identity and institutional racism. Students remarked on the profound impact these conversations have had on their perspectives.

### **Create projects and assignments that reflect youth culture.**

Teachers at ACORN have received professional development on how to distribute assignments using technology in addition to traditional means. One teacher said, "Instead of saying, 'Oh, god, I hate Facebook. All you guys do is just go on Facebook all the time,' learn to use it." Other teachers talked about creating new types of assignments. In one social studies class, for example, the teacher facilitated a rap battle between students representing world leaders from the Enlightenment Period. The rap that each student made reflected their assigned world leader's philosophy and the events of their life, and advocated for why their figure's philosophy was better than the others.

**"Relatable is the best way to put it.**

They're relatable to us. It's not just, 'okay, you teach us math and then all right, the class is over. You can leave now.' They'll sit back and talk to us."

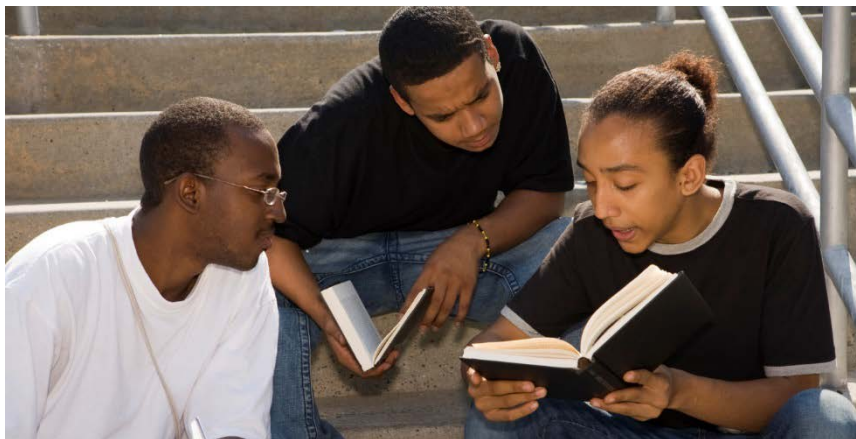
– ACORN Student

### Infuse math instruction with concepts from everyday life.

Math projects at ACORN involve collaborative efforts (e.g., groups of students designing rollercoaster tracks) in addition to individual assignments. One math teacher described how students designed architectural structures based on things that they've seen in Brooklyn, where the school is located (e.g., the Barclay's Center), in their own neighborhoods, and in their own homes.

### Select reading material written by authors of color and/or featuring protagonists of color.

Students are more likely to engage with a text when they can see themselves in it. ACORN relies on the ID program, a series of reading and writing workshops for students that rely on “enabling texts,” which resonate with students of color and encourage them to view themselves as capable and confident. Some of the reading materials they use include: *Standing at the Scratch Line* by Guy Johnson; *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; *Fences* by August Wilson; *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini; *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor; *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake; *Forged by Fire* by Sharon Draper; *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry; and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley.



“When I started off freshman year, I wasn’t all about grades. I was more laid back. I would just go home, play games, do nothing. I didn’t want to be bothered with this.

Then, as I got to the end of freshman year, sophomore year, **I have teachers telling me, ‘I know what you can do.** I’m not going let you sit back, and put yourself down, and belittle yourself because, if I let you keep this up, you’re going to put yourself to the point where you can’t come back from it...If I empower you now, it’s going to get all of us a lasting result.”

– ACORN Student

# ADDRESSING TEACHERS' MINDSETS AND BELIEFS

## HIGH SCHOOL FOR LAW AND PUBLIC SERVICE

Six staff members at HSLPS participated in formal CRE training provided by an external vendor. In addition, HSLPS leaders use existing school structures to create opportunities for *all* educators to learn about CRE.

### Create Professional Learning Communities.

All HSLPS teachers join one of five Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) of their choice—small groups of 5-7 staff members that meet weekly, for one class period during the school day, to discuss a particular topic related to serving students more effectively. One PLC is focused on Culturally Relevant Education (other focus areas include college and career readiness and social emotional support). In its meetings, the CRE PLC uses an inquiry process to examine members' practices and look for ways to make their curricula and instruction more culturally relevant. The PLC members also share CRE resources and strategies with other teachers at staff-wide PD sessions. The existence of a CRE PLC reflects the schools' commitment to institutionalizing CRE as a widespread practice, not restricted to those who have received formal training. One school leader explained, "[The PLC] kind of gave us time to talk together and understand the importance of having the school invested [in CRE]; it can't just be a small pocket activity." The PLC structure can also be powerful in other ways: (1) it sets aside time to discuss topics that may otherwise be overlooked, (2) it can help ensure sustainability of a strategy or ethos in the face of staff turnover, and (3) because PLCs are led by teachers, other teachers are more likely to buy in.

### Use data to understand the unique challenges faced by male students of color.

School leaders reported that some staff questioned their focus on Black and Latino boys; they didn't see a need to specifically emphasize their male students. One tactic school leaders used to confront this resistance was to generate data reports about the graduation rates, grades, and credit accumulation of their male students, which were shared during regular staff meetings. When teachers were able to see the clear discrepancies between the performance of their female and male students, they were more likely to understand the importance of being intentional about how to better serve boys (although teachers continued to express concerns about neglecting female students).

### Allow for frank conversations about race among teachers.

Staff at HSLPS—especially those involved with the CRE PLC—spoke at length about how a focus on CRE has challenged teachers to talk about race in ways they might not have felt comfortable doing before. One teacher admitted that, prior to CRE training, he was "afraid of those topics." Teachers now have the space and language to navigate the topic of race with each other and, in turn, with students.

"Schools have been perceived as this 'neutral zone' where there's no politics; we just focus on academics. [But this initiative] has allowed the political dimension to be acknowledged...There's now a language that people can use to talk about these things... now there's at least some comfort level with people using a word like racism where usually you can't even say that word...**It's part of a proactive way that we can include all our students and fight for them** in this world that is not so friendly to African-American and Latino students."  
— HSLPS Teacher

# CRE IN THE CLASSROOM

## HIGH SCHOOL FOR LAW AND PUBLIC SERVICE

### **Incorporate CRE into classroom observations.**

When school leaders at HSLPS conduct classroom observations, they look for evidence of CRE, particularly as it relates to making instruction relevant and engaging for boys. School leaders ask teachers to think about how often their boys are participating in class and whether they are engaging their male students as much as their female students. This action came in response to training that highlighted the subtle ways teachers may engage female students more frequently than their male peers.

### **Address current events affecting people of color.**

Teachers talked about the importance of incorporating current events into classroom instruction, particularly those that are germane to young men of color, including “stop and frisk” policies, police brutality, and the criminal justice system’s response to the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO and Eric Garner in NYC. Teachers in different subject areas designed classroom projects around these issues. For example, one class used the Socratic Seminar method to discuss questions raised by the Tamir Rice case in Cleveland, OH, including media coverage of the events. Educators shared that encouraging students to think and talk through these kinds of events in class can be empowering and meaningful for students approaching adulthood.

### **Encourage more student participation.**

HSLPS teachers use questioning techniques (e.g., posting sentence starters on the walls to encourage participation by students who are more apprehensive to share in class) to make sure all students have a voice. They also rearrange desks in classrooms, moving from traditional rows to clusters, which further facilitates student-led discussion. One teacher reported that while these techniques were born out of a focus on male students, all students benefit from the approach.

“I think that when the opportunities present themselves, we seize those moments....For example, when the indictment—well, lack of an indictment [in the Ferguson case] came back—I set aside what I had planned because the idea was whatever I taught them that day, in 20 years they’ll forget. If **I took the time to... let them talk about what had happened** and ask questions that they didn’t know who to ask or where to get the answers ...that’s something that they ...were going to carry much further than the causes of the Civil War.”

– HSLPS Teacher

# SUPPORT FOR ELL AND BILINGUAL STUDENTS

## MANHATTAN BRIDGES HIGH SCHOOL

Manhattan Bridges serves a predominantly English Language Learner population. Fifty percent of its students are classified as ELLs, while another 30 percent are either former ELLs or students whose heritage language is Spanish. In addition, 41 percent of students at Manhattan Bridges are Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE),<sup>iv</sup> a group that faces substantial obstacles to high school graduation. The staff at Manhattan Bridges approached CRE in terms of effectively serving ELL and recent immigrant students, as well as their families.

### Train teachers to support students learning English.

Teachers at Manhattan Bridges receive a number of trainings and certifications related to supporting ELL and bilingual students. Nearly all 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade teachers hold or are in the process of earning a bilingual extension certification, which ensures that they are prepared to teach ELL students in a bilingual setting. Teachers also receive Quality Teaching of the English Language (QTEL) training from the NYC DOE and participate in PD led by Dr. Ofelia Garcia of the CUNY Graduate Center about *translanguaging*—which refers to a bilingual person’s flexible and sometimes simultaneous use of two languages to make meaning of their everyday lives and experiences.<sup>v</sup> While some teachers said that their classes already incorporated *translingual* methods, they found it helpful to formalize their practices through literature, guidelines, and benchmarks.

### Offer a dual language program.

Teachers at Manhattan Bridges scaffold content for native Spanish speakers. They provide materials—including exams—in both Spanish and in English. Some content classes (e.g., history, science) are offered primarily in Spanish. Teachers described using conversations in Spanish as a foundation for learning English.

### Celebrate Spanish as a resource.

Manhattan Bridges staff think of students’ Spanish skills as an asset, rather than a factor holding them back. Some Manhattan Bridges parents expressed concern to staff members that speaking Spanish in class would prevent students from developing English skills. In response, teachers described consistently reinforcing that Spanish is a resource, not something to get rid of. One teacher said, “We want them to be good at both [languages]. Sometimes it’s a matter of training the parents and teaching them that this is okay.” Sometimes, teachers also have to convince students—especially those who are more comfortable in English—that speaking Spanish will be valuable in the future. Moreover, celebrating Spanish encourages students to be proud of their background. One teacher said, “We don’t have students, especially boys, feeling, ‘Oh, I’m less than.’ [Instead they feel like] it’s okay for me to celebrate my language and be proud of who I am.”

“Some students felt better off expressing themselves in Spanish, [so] I let them do that. They would express themselves in Spanish, and then we would go back to the English. **I wouldn’t force them and say, ‘No. You have to say it in English.’** ...At first, they go with their strength, articulate their thoughts. Then we strategically summarize it in English or something. It’s purposefully switching from the language that the student feels strong in back to the other language as necessary.”  
– *Manhattan Bridges Teacher*



# EMBRACING DIVERSITY WITHIN AND ACROSS CULTURES

## MANHATTAN BRIDGES HIGH SCHOOL

Manhattan Bridges staff were emphatic about recognizing the differences within cultures that are often painted with one broad brush. The principal said, “Assuming that because they’re all Latino, they’re all from the same culture is a big error.”

### **Pay attention to cultural differences that exist among students of seemingly monolithic groups.**

Manhattan Bridges students and their families not only hail from different places—including the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, and more—but also have diverse experiences within each of these locales (e.g., there is a significant difference between students who attended schools in a small town versus those from a big city). Students also speak different styles of Spanish. Manhattan Bridges attempts to make sure that all students and families have at least one point of connection in the building by hiring teachers from diverse Latino backgrounds. The school has also chosen not to commemorate holidays or special occasions from particular countries in favor of hosting schoolwide celebrations that honor all the cultures of their students. Finally, Manhattan Bridges emphasizes the importance of multiculturalism to new teachers, so they are conscientious about including all students.

### **Recognize the needs of students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants.**

Students who are new to the United States often face daunting obstacles. Staff at Manhattan Bridges work to address these challenges, so students can more fully participate in their education. For example, many Manhattan Bridges students have been out of school for more than a year or received inadequate formal education in their home country. Thus, the school focuses not just on delivering academic content, but also on helping students develop cross-cutting skills they need to succeed in school, such as note-taking and time management. Staff also explained that many of their immigrant students—a large proportion of whom have been separated from their families or live in multi-family homes—live in poverty. To alleviate any financial burden associated with school, Manhattan Bridges purchases students’ uniforms and subsidizes events (sometimes through fundraisers). A teacher recalled how one school flier contained the word “American,” which immediately alienated many students from that school. Staff work to ensure that these students and their families feel safe to take advantage of the school’s services and supports.

### Support undocumented students on their path to college.

Staff reported that some students who were academically ready for college lacked documentation needed to enroll. Manhattan Bridges partners with private colleges who are willing to work with undocumented individuals. These schools often offer scholarships and financial aid packages that are available to undocumented students. Manhattan Bridges also holds events and meetings with parents about how to pay for college and provides information to students about organizations that can help them obtain proper documentation.

### Build connections with families.

Staff members noted that buy-in from families was critical to the success of student programs, and described strategies used to build this support. For example, the school's mentoring program held events at the same time as parent-teacher conferences. One staff member said, "We want the parents to be part of the program, of the process. We don't want the parents to feel alienated. We want them to see that this [mentor] is someone who you could trust." Beyond any one program, Manhattan Bridges staff talked at length about getting to know students and their families and the struggles they are facing—from sleeping arrangements to eating habits—in order to be better able to serve their students. One teacher said that this more holistic approach has "redirected our focus and allowed the whole community to be part of the solution."

"Our ELS population is very talented. I personally believe ELLs are gifted. Just the fact that you could read García Márquez and you could also read Steinbeck. **Hey, not everybody could do that,** and they could actually tap into those two worlds." –  
*Manhattan Bridges Teacher*



## Questions for Educators

1. Before reading this guide, how did you define or understand Culturally Relevant Education? How did the recommendations and strategies you read about here reinforce and/or challenge your definition?
2. This guide discussed a variety of approaches to CRE, including CRE-related professional development, CRE in the classroom, supporting ELL and bilingual students, and embracing diversity. Does your school currently excel in any of these areas? Does your school need to grow in some of these areas?
3. What do the examples in this guide suggest about where you might focus your CRE agenda in the future? If so, what immediate steps might you take to get this work off the ground?
4. How might expanding CRE in your school influence classroom instruction? Relationships with students? Your school's discipline policy?
5. What role might CRE play in the process of hiring and training new staff members?

## Organizations that Provided CRE Training to ESI Schools

*The following organizations have provided CRE training to ESI schools:*

Adelaide L. Sanford Institute  
<http://www.sanfordinstitute.org/>

Advancement Via Individual Determination  
(AVID) <http://www.avid.org/>

America's Promise Alliance  
<http://www.americaspromise.org/>

Brotherhood Sister Sol  
<http://brotherhood-sistersol.org/>

Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color  
(COSEBOC) <http://coseboc.org/>

Connect with Kids  
<http://connectwithkids.com/>

Facing History and Ourselves  
<https://www.facinghistory.org/>

Dr. Michelle Knight-Manuel, Teachers College  
<http://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/mk700/>

Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and  
the Transformation of Schools  
<http://www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/>

Dr. Yolanda Sealy-Ruiz, Teachers College  
<http://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/ys2061/>

Umoja Community  
<http://www.umojacommunity.org/>

Undoing Racism: The People's Institute for  
Survival Beyond <http://www.pisab.org/>

## Related Sources

*Schools interested in providing their staff with books related to CRE may refer to this abbreviated list:*

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed.). New York, NY: New Press.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed.). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Tatum, A. (2005). *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Tatum, A. (2009). *Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Male Adolescent Males* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed.). London: Heinemann.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>ii</sup> Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press. Howard, G. (2006). *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Delpit, L. (1995). *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed.). New York, NY: New Press.

<sup>iv</sup> SIFE students are immigrants who come from a home in which a language other than English is spoken; enter a United States school after second grade; have had at least two years less schooling than their peers; function at least two years below expected grade level in reading and math; and may be pre-literate in their first language. See <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/SIFE%20Paper%20final.pdf?pt=1>.

<sup>v</sup> See: <http://www.nysieb.ws.gc.cuny.edu/files/2012/06/FINAL-Translanguaging-Guide-With-Cover-1.pdf>

To learn more about our evaluation of the Expanded Success Initiative, please visit our website:

[http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/research/projects/esi\\_evaluation](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation)

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City's public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students' development and academic success.

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